

Fifty Years of Interfilm

Julia Helmke

The international church film organisation Interfilm will be 50 years old in October 2005. Why was it founded and how did it develop? Where did it succeed, where did it encounter difficulties? Fifty years is a long time for an international organisation that is exclusively voluntary and has neither permanent employees nor an office of its own. The following article gives an inside view of Interfilm, an organisation that always felt connected with WACC, but that nevertheless insisted on diversity and independence.

Berlin, Cannes, Locarno, Montreal, Karlovy Vary, Riga, Gothenburg, Zlin ? there are church film prizes in all these places and more. Across Europe and beyond they host film festivals to which church juries are invited ? and in some of these cities, this tradition has existed for over 40 years. Usually this no longer takes place according to separate religious denominations, but ecumenically, in alliance with Interfilm and Signis (previously known as OCIC).

It is an open question whether the men ? and few women ? from five Western European countries could have dreamed of such a development when they met in Paris in 1955 to talk about the challenge that film represents for the church. As a result of their discussions, they founded the international Protestant organization Interfilm on 22 October 1955.

In the early years they wanted above all to ?protect? people from bad films and to promote the emergence and distribution of good films. To do so, they hoped for a close relationship with the World Council of Churches (WCC). But the mass and art films did not completely fit into the WCC?s existing tasks such as mission, world responsibility, theology, and the like. The variety of possible approaches to film also quickly became evident: France pursued discussions about well-made commercial films, Germany strengthened its own Protestant film journalism, and the Anglo-Saxons promoted clearly religious productions.

Commitment was great, but so was Christian responsibility in relation to film and society. Film is the mass medium, and cinema attendance had exceeded church service attendance. Thus the questions arose: What can the church do? How can it act and react? First it wanted to become acquainted with others and exchange ideas, to increase the number of its members and to exert a stronger influence with combined forces. That applied both to church leaders, who often did not exactly know what church and film had to do with one another, as well as to the film industry and interested Christians.

New members and leaders

The number of members grew quickly: in 1956, one year after its foundation, Interfilm already had 16 member organisations from Norway to Austria. Church organisations from the United States joined soon after. One of the key figures was John Taylor, a North American artist and photographer who, as Director of Communication Services at WCC, accompanied Interfilm from the outset and made important contacts. Another important figure was the Swiss Friedrich Hochstrasse, editor-in-chief of a Protestant television, radio and film journal. He presided over Interfilm from 1959 to 1970.

On the German side, there was a whole set of men who influenced international film work: Film Commissioner Werner Hess, then Hermann Gerber, and the journalist Dietmar Schmidt. One person sticks out, however: Jan Hes, theologically-interested sociologist who founded, among other things, the Film Centre in Hilversum/ Netherlands, and from 1955 until his death in 1991 untiringly and continuously worked as Secretary-General of Interfilm.

In 1960, Interfilm decided to give up the dream of producing its own films or influencing film policies. It decided that this should be done as much as possible by individual members locally in their own countries. Instead, Interfilm turned consciously to the appreciation and promotion of

current film work. Film was perceived as part of culture and art and supported from this perspective.

After the inauguration of its own Interfilm prize, the step to participation in international film festivals was very small. The first Interfilm jury prize was awarded at the Berlin Film Festival in 1963. It went to the American comedy *Lilies of the Field* with Sydney Poitier. Not an undisputed decision, but the International Catholic Jury, which had been active at the Berlin Film Festival since 1956, made the same choice. A few years later, this contact was intensified. The atmosphere after the Second Vatican Council promoted the realisation that Protestant and Catholic film work were in agreement about basic assumptions. In addition, around 1968 an atmosphere emerged that put in question not only the concern of the church with film but the church itself ? given this situation, it was good to co-operate. Beside the development of jury work, ecumenical co-operation became one of the most important and steady bedrocks of Interfilm. The Protestant founders probably would not have dreamed of that either.

In 1969, a further premiere in Interfilm history took place: the first Protestant jury at the most important film festival, a temple of glamour and business ? Cannes. The jury awarded its prize to *Easy Rider* and proved thereby its impartiality and its feeling for films that move human beings. The first guidelines which Interfilm set up in 1971 as criteria for film evaluation and prize assignment express this very well: ?For directors of films of high artistic quality [...], which in a special way express a human attitude appropriate to the gospel or which stimulate a discussion of it.? These are open criteria which are neither arbitrary, nor neglect film as a sign of the times nor the self-understanding of church jury work.

In 1973 and 1974, the first ecumenical jury in Locarno and then in Cannes, took place. It was an experiment which proved satisfactory and which has developed over the years. Today, in Cannes, for example, a voluntary group is busy the whole year round spreading the work of the ecumenical jury beyond the festival. It prepares for this event, makes full use of it, does publicity work and tries to anchor the connection of church, ecumenism and film in the context of the local congregation and society. All this means church film work in a secular environment!

Through such experiences, Interfilm learned how important it was to formulate film evaluation in a professional manner and to speak a generally understandable language. Church juries, in part earlier than others, have developed a feeling for film trends that are on the margins and which deserve to be given more attention. They discovered films from other continents. They advocated social criticism in film and recognised that the contents of film not only exhibit a proximity to the Biblical message, but can also themselves represent an important inquiry into church and theology. Films were seen as seismographs ? the 1970s were turbulent times.

The 1980s were also exciting. At last more films from Central and Eastern Europe came to the film festivals. They combined politics and spirituality, realism and poetry in a unique way. The gateway to another world, which is neighbouring and nevertheless strange, opened. The director Andrei Tarkovsky ranks among the most frequent prize winners. Many contacts with film creators developed through the prizes and film and culture were perceived as a means of communication, as ?eye openers?.

Studying film and society

Interfilm was not only active in jury work. It always gave importance to exchange and thematic study of church and film as well as society and contemporary history. Interfilm?s work on film studies began in the 1960s. In the beginning, it was carried out together with the Protestant Academy in Arnoldshain near Frankfurt, Germany. Topics included ?Art and Morality?, ?Christ in Film??. ?Traces of the Gospel in Film?. One of the most influential conferences took place in Bern in 1978: ?Social-Critical Elements in Christian Film?.

Soon an Interfilm Academy was founded, which, under the direction of Pastor Eckart Bruchner from Germany, worked in many European countries and with many partners. One emphasis was to arouse the interest of younger people and another was to strengthen the role of women in media. Among other things, Eckart Bruchner founded the 'One Future Prize' at the Munich Film Festival after the nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl in 1986, and led seminars on unknown film countries in order to strengthen consciousness and tolerance.

1980 was not 1955 however. Film was no longer the only medium of moving pictures. Television, the first forms of video, and other electronic media had gained more and more influence. Interfilm tried to open itself up to these currents. Here contact with WACC continued to grow.

Internal challenges and difficulties must also be mentioned. Interfilm was poor – poor in financial resources and poor in (wo)manpower – at least regarding the many projects which were waiting for Interfilm in the fields of cinema, ecumenism, and cultural work. Interfilm did not completely succeed in divorcing itself from the hierarchical structures centred on Western Europe put in place at the beginning. Nor did it succeed in becoming a sizable institution on an international level. Nevertheless, Interfilm held a general assembly in New York in 1979 at which WCC General Secretary Philip Potter spoke. At the beginning of the 1980s, the organization consisted of different departments (Interfilm Europe, Interfilm America, Interfilm Asia) and had contacts in Africa and the Middle East. However, communication did not always succeed: (film)cultural and religious differences were too big.

Nevertheless, Interfilm also possessed the strength to change and to further develop. A seminar in Colombo, Sri Lanka, took place in 1986. The inter-religious topic came up and here, as elsewhere, not only the content of a film, but also its aesthetics began to move into the foreground.

By the end of the 1980s things began to thaw behind the iron curtain, and Interfilm did not remain dormant. Owing to good Catholic contacts, an international ecumenical jury met at the Moscow Film Festival even before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Orthodox jurors took part and participation in festivals in St. Petersburg and Kiev followed. Interfilm also engaged itself to work in East Germany and participated in the Documentary Film Days in Leipzig, and later in the festival in Cottbus focusing on Eastern Europe.

The unexpected death of Jan Hes took place in the middle of this atmosphere of change. His contribution to Interfilm cannot be overestimated; his absence left a large gap. He was a driving force, had been the publisher of the Interfilm journal, and often acted as a communicator and moderator. Interfilm needed some years in order to rearrange itself. Starting from the middle of the 1990s, however, a new departure was to be felt within Interfilm when WACC began to support Interfilm in the form of communication projects. That meant concretely, for example, that the presence of women and people from Central and Eastern Europe was actively promoted in the ecumenical juries.

Interfilm rediscovers Europe

Under the presidency of Hans Werner Dannowski (1989-2004), it was decided to give up the goal of being an organisation acting worldwide and to strengthen instead work in the new and larger Europe. Naturally, this did not mean that no contacts with other continents were maintained, but a clear focus was set. In 1995, a set of conferences began which had Europe and European culture as their topics. First, contact was sought in Northern European countries. The film medium was understood as a mirror of social processes, disclosing strangeness and showing familiarity in a new light.

How do films illustrate the social, cultural and religious contexts of these countries and how do these contexts affect the films? The narrative quality of films was thereby emphasised. These impulses were fruitful in Scandinavia: in 2001, the Culture Council of the Evangelical Lutheran

Church of Sweden awarded a film prize at the Festival in Göteborg; one year later, the Danish church followed with its own film prize.

In 1998, the focus turned to the South, to the more strongly Catholic-influenced Mediterranean countries. In the southern French city of Nîmes, the agenda emphasized the topic of film, theology and culture in a desecrated post-modern world. One year later, a jump to the Northeast followed, to Riga/Latvia. Under the title 'Integration and Disintegration?', the seminar was clearly political. An explicitly ecumenical perspective was present in a seminar in Mannheim 2001 with the title '(Dis)Regarding the Image?', which debated the difference between Protestant and Catholic 'afterimages?'. Most recently a conference was organized in the Orthodox Academy on Crete in late 2004 to discuss Orthodox understandings of images. These have all been all path-breaking events. According to Interfilm, church and culture, ecumenicity and education, politics and spirituality belong together and can question, enrich, and mutually strengthen one another.

Interfilm dialogues with theology and culture

A topic which received strong impulses from Germany among others, but which in the USA and in Anglo-Saxon countries had for a long time has been viewed under the auspice of religious and cultural studies, was dialogue between film and theology. In the mid-1980s, Hans Werner Dannowski provocatively asked why concern with church and film had so strongly focussed on social and parochial aspects, but had never got involved with theology or theology with film. The question went along with the observation that the church as an institution had to a large extent lost contact with culture and the arts. This harmed it doubly: on the one hand, what is missing is an ally in a world which is globalised, post-modern, and which no longer asks the question of meaning. On the other hand, what is missing is a critical opposite number to hear and understand the world's questions.

Interfilm confronts these questions, which are also methodically and fundamentally discussed. From the mid 1990s onwards, we can thus observe a scholarly and interdisciplinary discourse on theology, religion and film. Interfilm members now write doctoral dissertations on topics such as 'Redemption in Film?' or 'The Cinema Meaning-Machine?.'

Beginning in 1988, with the appointment of Swiss pastor Hans Hodel as Jury Co-ordinator of Interfilm, jury work was further professionalized. New juries were added. Contacts with festival directorships and with interested local groups in film, media, culture and the church were intensified. Juries not only awarded prizes to films. They also communicated what their background is, and why they are participating in a film festival. Some ecumenical juries in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia, could not be continued due to a sensitive political-religious situations. But inquiries came from younger film festivals in Central Europe, like Bratislava or from the Children's Film Festival in Zlin, which gladly welcomed an ecumenical jury. New ground was broken.

A further innovation was the 'European Templeton Film Award?'. The prize is awarded annually at the Berlin Film Festival in partnership with the Conference of European Churches and the John Templeton Foundation. Since 1997, the first time the prize was awarded, not only has the prize money increased, but also public attention.

Interfilm turns 50. Who would have dreamed of that and what dreams are yet to come? Much has changed, some things have remained the same: fascination for film artworks, passion for an encounter between church and film in this world. In future it will be necessary to communicate even more persuasively, to find more partners, and to increase the lastingness of the initiatives and commitment.

Julia Helmke (PhD) is a Pastor and Interfilm member. After her ordination, she studied film criticism in Munich. After working in the Ecumenical Office, she taught film and religion in Christian journalism at the University of Erlangen. For her doctoral thesis, she researched

Protestant and ecumenical film jury work between 1948 and 1988.